

. . . that Uzbekistan pressures neighboring Central Asian countries to return asylum seekers who have fled Uzbek government repression of their religious freedoms?

Since Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, its government has systematically and egregiously violated freedom of religion or belief, as well as other human rights. The Uzbek government harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity regardless of their religious affiliation. Thousands remain imprisoned as alleged extremists, including many who reportedly are denied due process and tortured. Since 2006, the State Department has designated Uzbekistan a "Country of Particular Concern" for these egregious violations, but since 2009 has placed a waiver on taking any action as a consequence of the CPC designation.

In June 2011, Uzbekistan successfully pressured Kazakhstan to forcibly return 28 Uzbek asylum seekers, who had sought refuge in Kazakhstan claiming persecution for their Muslim beliefs. In June 2012, the UN Committee against Torture (CAT) found that it had been "sufficiently established" that Uzbekistan has a "significant risk of torture ... in particular for individuals practicing their faith outside of the official framework." The CAT found that the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment had been violated when these 28 Uzbek asylum seekers were forcibly returned. The Committee noted that the men were detained as soon as they arrived back in Uzbekistan and that some had received prison terms of more than ten years.

Another Uzbek now has fled Uzbekistan fearing for his safety. Imam Sulaimanov had led a mosque in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, but fled the country in 2000 due to pressure by the Uzbek government. He is seeking political asylum in Kyrgyzstan, but Kyrgyz secret police detained him in October 2012 and since January 2013 he has been fighting extradition to Uzbekistan. According to observers, he faces torture and conviction on fabricated charges of 'extremism' if he is returned. Kyrgyzstan's human rights Ombudsperson told the NGO Forum 18 that "extraditing Sulaimanov back to Uzbekistan would violate our international human rights obligations...I will use all my authority and influence to prevent Sulaimanov's extradition." However, Kyrgyzstan's General Prosecutor's Office, in response to a question from Forum 18 about sending someone to Uzbekistan where they might face torture, responded: "Let them [the Uzbek authorities] do it. It doesn't bother me at all."

Sulaimanov's court appeal against his extradition was upheld in March 2013, Forum 18 noted. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recognized Sulaimanov as a refugee, he was detained again and Kyrgyz secret police sent him to a prison in Osh which is located close to the Uzbek border. The Kyrgyz secret police would tell Forum 18 only that Sulaimanov currently is held in the Osh Region NSC Investigation Prison. Past Uzbek citizens have been kidnapped from the Osh region and returned to Uzbekistan.